

Introduction. Contemporary reflections on the role of Translation and Interpreting Studies in Academia: Balancing theory and practice in training

Introducción. Reflexiones contemporáneas sobre el papel de los estudios de traducción en el entorno académico: hacia un equilibrio entre la teoría y la práctica en la enseñanza

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INTRODUCCIÓN¹

As a translation studies scholar, I consider the love-hate relationship between theory and practice, an ever-present issue which cannot be left undiscussed. Aside from being academic in nature, the question of the ideal balance between these two aspects of teaching translation is also quite personal, and it is also influenced by the individual's experiences and worldview. Teaching translation in a higher education institution is, as we all know, a complex academic mission that requires a thorough understanding of its theoretical foundations as well as providing students

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with hands-on skills they can use in real-world situations. Admittedly, outreach to practice strongly resonates across Academia nowadays.

This essay reflects on my own experience of teaching translation in Slovakia, and I shall focus on the interplay between theory and practice in an academic setting. I will also point out why theory still matters in today's pragmatically-minded world. At the same time, I wish to underline the vital importance of research in shaping the future of translation and interpreting. The personal reflections in this essay are rooted in my long-term experience as a translation trainer, researcher and professional English-German-Slovak translator, as well as in my interactions with the broader academic and language industry communities.

One of the first things that students typically expect when they enter a translation study programme (I believe, not only in Slovakia) is the acquisition of mostly practical skills. I do not reproach them for this. More traditionally, these skills feature mastering the lexical and stylistic conventions of various text genres, and becoming at least partially knowledgeable in selected specialist domains such as legal, business, or medical translation etc. In our era of rapidly advancing translation technology, students must also be apt to use computer-assisted translation (CAT) tools, machine translation (MT) post-editing, and other digital resources. There is no way back (sorry, lovers of literary translation).

Indeed, the mission of practical translation training is to prepare undergraduates for the demands within the current job market. Many students envision themselves working as freelance translators, in-house translators for big companies (DGT at the European Commission is still a lure), or in other roles that require prompt and competent translation work. Translation project / terminology manager, language engineer, localiser, post-editor or multilanguage designer, to mention just a few of these newer roles, are also a possible path to take, either full-time or part-time. As translation trainers, and members of the academic Ivory Tower, too, we are often keenly aware of these pressing pragmatic concerns.

However, while the emphasis on practical skills is necessary and appealing, an overemphasis on practice without grounding in theory can leave students ill-prepared to handle the more complex challenges they will inevitably face sooner or later. The tremendous progress in MT and its latest hype, for instance, may suggest (especially to those lay people who know next to nothing about translating) that human translators will be replaced in certain contexts, but, in reality, it has only shifted a focus on the translation skills and competences required. It is the human translator's

ability to understand the wider context, implied intention, semantic nuances, and the human aspects of communication, as manifested for example in the narrative potential of literary texts, which remain critical – and theory plays a significant role in developing these abilities. In my view, theory significantly informs the translator’s decision-making process, helping them evaluate their procedures in translation in a more erudite manner. At the same time, translation theory plays a fundamental role in translation criticism since a critical analysis of translation, unfortunately, cannot take place without theoretical underpinnings. Moreover, translation theories –whether equivalence-based, functionalist, or postmodernist– offer deeper ways of thinking about texts that go beyond the word-for-word rendering of meaning. Adopting the latter stance, I believe that theory encourages translators to consider how their choices may affect the reception of the translated text, the power dynamics at play between languages and cultures, and how translation can either challenge or reinforce dominant narratives in the case of literary translation. While practical skills are undoubtedly important, I believe that they must be sensitively balanced with a solid foundation in theory. Theories of translation, ranging from early ideas by Cicero, Horace and St. Jerome to contemporary debates in postcolonial translation studies or feminist translation theories, which all offer rich contexts within which trainees can frame their work. Above all, one should realize that theoretical frameworks help translation trainees think critically about the texts they are translating and invite them to reflect on the broader cultural and ideological factors at play. In addition, theories promote recognition of translation as an act of interpretation, intervention and action. The translator must negotiate meaning, not only between words but also between cultures, various periods, and ideological frameworks. For instance, feminist translation theories challenge traditional notions of “faithfulness” in translation by advocating a more critical approach that considers the patriarchal foundation of both the source and target texts. Similarly, postcolonial theories of translation raise important questions about power, representation, and the effects of colonisation on language. Furthermore, the fact that theory aids translators’ understanding of their ethical obligations is yet another reason for its support. Theories centred on translation ethics might offer a framework for thinking about how to maintain a balance between the requirements and expectations of the target audience and faithfulness to the original text. The capacity to critically

consider these matters appears to be more crucial than ever in a time when fake news and deception seem pervasive.

When teaching translation, the problem lies in striking the right balance between theory and practice. Too much focus on theoretical frameworks without practical application can put off students who are eager to acquire marketable skills. Conversely, neglecting theory can relegate translation to a mere mechanical process, depriving students of the deeper understanding necessary to become thoughtful and reflective practitioners. From my own experience, integrating theory into practical translation exercises has proven to be an extremely effective way to bridge this gap. For example, presenting students with a translation task and then discussing how different theoretical approaches could shape their translations allows them to see theory in action, and thus recognise its potential.

In light of the aforementioned aspects connected with the theory versus practice debate, the question that now arises is why translating and interpreting research remains so important. Over the past few years, research on audiovisual translation, corpus-based translation experimentation, and cognitive translation studies has taken strides, thus inspiring new avenues of interest. Identifying and filling in the niches within the field is an important function of research. For instance, the necessity for additional study on non-Western translation traditions and minority languages has, of late, become increasingly apparent. Although a large portion of translation theory has historically been based through the European lens, scholars are currently exploring how translation functions in other, often minor, linguistic and cultural contexts. Precisely this lens of research seems crucial for creating a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of translation.

Another vital legacy of research is to close the gap between theory and practice. While theory provides the conceptual framework for understanding translation, research can inspire practical insights that inform both teaching and real-world practice. For instance, studies on the use of CAT tools in professional translation settings have provided valuable data on how these tools can be optimised to support human translators. Similarly, research on interpreting in medical and legal contexts has led to the initiation of best practices that ensure accuracy and fairness in high-stakes situations. In my experience, trainees are often more receptive to theoretical concepts when they can see how those ideas may be backed up

by concrete research or how they manifest in real-world translation scenarios.

In conclusion, where do we go from here? I wish to reiterate that the balance between theory and practice remains a central concern of the 2020s despite its old roots. While practical skills are undeniably of paramount importance to translation trainees, they must be grounded in a solid understanding of the theoretical foundations of translation. Conversely, any theory not applied to practice only wastes its potential. As responsible educators, researchers, and practitioners in translation, we must uphold a balanced approach that values both theory and practice, thus equipping our prospective trainees with the skills and knowledge they need to thrive in a rapidly shifting world. Academia should remain an academic institution, further cultivating its academic mission in the form of a theory, however, sensitively and reasonably linked with translation practice in the form of real-world tasks. Best of luck, dear Academia!